Was Russell correct in his assessment of the extent to which Rousseau's and Locke's ideas were related to the German and Anglo-American leaders of WWII?

After World War II, many started to think about the cause of this catastrophe in human history. This reflection extended beyond the immediate horrors of the war to a deeper interrogation of the very foundations of the concept of “modernity,” questioning why the principles of the modern world based on individual liberty and democracy established since the late 18th century had seemingly collapsed and led to startling violence around the globe. Among them was Bertrand Russell, a widely acknowledged British intellectual and philosopher. In A History of Western Philosophy, one of his most acclaimed works, he made a famous claim: “Hitler is an outcome of Rousseau; Roosevelt and Churchill of Locke.” Russell’s statement is grounded on two ideas: that Rousseau’s relatively collective version of society, manifested typically in his definition and the application of the “general will,” has somewhat affinity with Hitler’s totalitarian state, and that Locke’s liberal individualism inspired Roosevelt and Churchill’s democratic political beliefs and alliance in the World War II. Given the complexity of this statement, I will emphasize two main points: first, that Russell’s quote serves as a useful analytical category; and second, that the visions of Enlightenment thinkers differ fundamentally from twentieth-century historical practices in both aims and means. Additionally, I will consider a minor point: whether it is appropriate to group Britain and the United States together.

The main dispute of the assertion is that there’s neither a direct “cause and effect” nor linear relationship in historical outcomes and philosophy. However, over-generalization is not an effective criticism because, I boldly assert, any meaningful and profound historical sociological assertion could potentially be overgeneralized. In fact, Russell's quote serves as an effective analytical framework because Locke – on the one hand – indeed established a thought tradition later known as liberalism. Locke’s preservation of natural rights is realized through laws and contracts and achieved by limiting the power of the state. He expected to establish freedom under the contract. Politically, he believed in constitutional government and the rule of law, the sovereignty of the King in Parliament (Jeffreys, 1974), which is in accordance with Churchill’s defense of parliamentary democracy. His view of freedom—that one is truly free only when possessing both the will to act or refrain and the ability to achieve this choice—mirrors the core function of Roosevelt’s New Deal legal framework and his “The Four Freedoms”. The New Deal provided essential economic security for middle-and low-income groups, empowering them to act on their desires, exemplified by the ability to afford a movie rather than merely wishing to see one without the necessary means, just like Locke’s claim that as Justice gives every Man a Title to the product of his honest Industry, and the fair Acquisitions of his Ancestors descended to him, so Charity gives every man a Title to so much of another's plenty, as will keep him from extreme want, where he has no means to subsist otherwise (Webb, 2015).

During World War II, Churchill and Roosevelt jointly led the "Free World" in the fight against the Nazis. This collaboration stems from an idea of the 'collective destiny of ethnic groups' in the narrative of Anglo-Saxonism. Anglo-Saxonism actually regarded the Anglo-American liberal system as a natural extension of "racial character" outside medieval English history. This belief in the common destiny of the Anglo-American democratic system permeated in the 19th century

colonial context.

On the other hand, Rousseau's political theory confronts the fundamental predicament of modern political systems: How can legitimate political authority be established without sacrificing individual freedom? His profound rejoinder: True freedom lies not in escaping all constraints, but in obeying laws one has prescribed for oneself. This insight culminates in his core concept: the "general will." The “general will” represents the collective volition formed by all citizens united, relentlessly pursuing the community's "common interest" or "public good." It transcends the mere aggregation of majority opinions; it is the "universal will" forged through rational reflection and the transcendence of personal interests. Rousseau explicitly contrasts this with "the will of all," the sheer sum of citizens' disparate private interests—precisely what any ordinary majority vote records. While the general will is always right, an ordinary majority vote—embodying the will of all—may well falter (Kain, 1990). For Rousseau, the "general will" signifies this abstract collective volition, a product of elevated reason, not a compromise of viewpoints. Permitting multiple "general wills" risks fostering factions and parties, fracturing the polity and betraying the very essence of the term "general." Consequently, the authentic "general will" must remain singular. Rousseau's noble aspiration was to liberate individuals, enabling genuine freedom. Yet, the inherent logic of the "general will" proves perilously susceptible to abuse. Later generations have often invoked it to legitimize totalitarianism, interpreting this concept—with its Collins' so-called "distinctly coercive flavor" (1976)—as the supremacy of the state's will, providing a theoretical blueprint for the subjugation of individual liberty.

Rousseau's public education views may support totalitarianism. In *Du Contrat Social* Book II, Chapter 7, he stated that legislators' primary duty is people's education (1968). This directly links to Hitler's regime, as the Third Reich implemented strict youth public education. Rousseau's institutionalized education shares striking parallels with certain objectives of education under the Hitler regime, notably cultivating citizens possessing unwavering patriotism and fostering collective honor and civic duty.

This truly attests to Russell’s belief that Rousseau somewhat paved the way for authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

Nevertheless, I have to point out that Russell's quote is partially unreasonable as there are numerous deviations and even fundamental contradictions in both the purpose and the means. First, Rousseau aimed to apply rationalism to create an ideal community guided by morality. His approach involved utilizing procedural justice. The four fundamental conditions of Rousseau’s “general will”, according to Kain, involve direct democracy, abstractness of the topic, formation of questions, and execution of the letter (1990). Hitler, in contrast, clearly did not adhere to any of these principles. Hitler's "Machtergreifung" was undemocratic, and he had no intention of embracing the concepts of democracy and freedom (as did Britain, the United States and France after World War I). His challenges to the liberal internationalist order, his attacks on democratic systems, his proof of the effectiveness of centralization through joy (entertainment and propaganda, the highway system and mass automobiles, etc). He imposed information control on the country and disregarded freedom of speech. According to Roberts, the Nazi party banned

many newspapers (even moderate press like Berliner Tageblatt came under the ban) and other forms of media (2013).

The main difference between Hitler’s and Rousseau’s public education is that Hitler saw public education as a tool to maintain his reign and to foster the regime’s soldiers to achieve Nazi goals, whereas Rousseau was wary that public education might suppress individuality. Thus, he emphasized that education must be in harmony with human nature and freedom. Rousseau sought a form of public education that would be shaped by sovereign individuals while respecting themselves, molding them into qualified "free" citizens. The sovereign people emerges as the supreme educational authority, and law defines the curriculum and recruitment of educational officials (Cook, 1975).

Subsequently, were Churchill and Roosevelt inevitably the direct manifestations of Locke's ideas? My negative answer first comes from the fact that Locke does not stand unquestionably as the true progenitor of classical liberalism. According to Stantion, liberalism casts Locke as the "hero" in its origin story, highlighting his social contract theory, individual rights, and the privatization of religion. Yet, this specific image was forged in the twentieth century to bolster liberal ideology (2018). Stantion further notes that George Sabine, in his History of Political Thought, declared "Locke was just as selfish as Hobbes," thereby cementing Locke's standing as the "father of individualism" (2018). Interestingly, the liberalist who was regarded by them as the so-called father of liberalism, Locke, even served as a member of the British Trade and Colonization Commission and participated in drafting the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina, which stipulated that literally every free person in Carolina has absolute power and authority over their black slaves, according to David Armitage (2004), clearly legitimizing slavery. Therefore, we can even conclude that the Lockean symbols that underlie Churchill and Roosevelt's “defenders of democracy” image were actually constructs developed in the 1930s to counter socialism and fascism, thus becoming “the hero of the Anglo-American liberal tradition.”

While grounded in Lockean principles—such as property rights and limited government—American liberalism has continually evolved to confront crises. The Progressive Era ushered in state intervention, and the New Deal embraced European social liberalism, representing a significant departure from classical tenets. Roosevelt himself understood that the label of socialism would clash with American tradition; consequently, his reforms were deliberately packaged as "liberalism" to resonate within that tradition, as noted by Vorländer (2004). Therefore, synthesizing the parallels between the aforementioned Roosevelt New Deal and Locke's concept of freedom reveals that Roosevelt's policies superficially adopted Locke's ideas, yet profoundly reconfigured them by integrating novel elements like progressivism and expert governance.

Churchill, hailed as one of the victorious wartime leaders, was also exalted as a staunch defender of liberalism after the war. Yet throughout his long political career, he proved no stranger to opportunism, warmongering fanaticism, nationalist fervor, and repeated betrayals of cherished liberal values. Churchill's policies were more aligned with collectivism rather than the Lockean tradition, as he continuously pushed Britain towards becoming a welfare state and implemented a “Germanized network” of state-controlled economies during wartime. Like Raico said, Churchill

thrusted a big slice of Bismarckianism over the whole underside of the British industrial system (1994). Notably, the similarity in ideology between Churchill and Hitler is also demonstrated in their shared logic of social Darwinism, racism and expansionism. With his stark Darwinian outlook, his elevation of war to the central place in human history, and his racism, as well as his fixation on 'great leaders,' Churchill’s worldview resembled that of his antagonist, Hitler (Raico, 2021). Additionally, Churchill's intimacy with communism deviated him even more away from the ideal of Lockean liberalism as it cemented his reputation as the quintessential embodiment of a Machiavellian pragmatist. To vanquish Hitler, he forged an alliance with Stalin, signed the notorious Percentages Agreement, sacrificed the freedom of Eastern Europe, and revealed himself as an absolute moralist.

Objectively, Churchill's social Darwinism and racism shared roots with Nazi ideology, both representing variations of 19th-century scientism. His welfare state policies, war mobilization, and economic intervention more closely resembled a Hobbesian sovereign state or the executor of Rousseau's general will than Locke's vision of limited government. It is also crucial to acknowledge that Churchill's image as a "defender of freedom" was largely a direct product of Cold War propaganda: his actual governance diverged fundamentally from the core tenets of classical liberalism.

Russell's claim overlooks 20th-century complexity, contrasting philosophies but ignoring historical nuances. Russell risks masking history's intermediation, ideas' flexibility, and paradoxes. Modernity's WWII failure arose from the interplay of ideals, power, nationalism, crisis, and warped philosophy, not just Rousseau or Locke. As we enter the 21st century's third decade, we still grapple with democracy's vulnerability and modernity's contradictions. At the same time, accelerating technology change, especially AI and digital surveillance, tests democratic governance and ethics, outpacing regulation and philosophical adaptation. We are facing the paradox of liberal modernity: yearning for autonomy while longing for community, progress accompanied by risks, universal rights clashing with inequality and identity politics, all of which unfold in a fragile, interconnected and polarized world.

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